DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 432 CG 024 774

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TITLE Psychological Reactance in Marital Enrichment Training.
PUB DATE [91]
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adjustment (to Environment); Counseling Effectiveness; *Marital Satisfaction; *Marriage; *Marriage Counseling; Sex Differences; *Spouses
IDENTIFIERS *Marriage Enrichment; *Training in Marriage Enrichment Model

ABSTRACT

This investigation was the second in a series of empirical studies on marital enrichment training using the Training in Marital Enrichment (TIME) model. In addition to further study of the TIME model, interest was also directed in the current study to more fully clarifying the nature of change in the model by including a measure of the construct of psychological reactance. Participants were 17 heterosexual couples who volunteered for participation in a marriage enrichment program which was advertised in Catholic parishes in a midwestern city. Participants met over a 7-week period for a minimum of 12 hours of the training program. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) and the Therapeutic Reactance Scale were used. Marital satisfaction as measured by a subscale of the DAS was reported as significantly greater following the marital enrichment training with the TIME model. Most of the reported gains in marital satisfaction came from the female participants. While the total dyadic adjustment score was found to increase in a positive direction, indicating overall greater total marital adjustment, the gains made were not at significant levels. While it is uncertain why this effect would hold only for the women in the sample, the results do suggest that this factor should be taken into account in marital enrichment efforts. (Contains 12 references.) (ABL)

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ED354432

Psychological Reactance in Marital Enrichment Training

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Abstract

The study provides evaluation of the effectiveness of a model of marital enrichment training, Training in Marriage Enrichment (TIME). The effect on marital adjustment in terms of marital satisfaction, dyadic consensus, cohesion and affection were examined. Also, the levels of psychological reactance present were examined as an indicator of perceived threat to freedom in the training environment. Findings showed improvement in marital satisfaction for the couples studied, along with a significant increase in the level of psychological reactance at post-test for the male participants. The implications of the findings for marital enrichment training are discussed.

Psychological Reactance in Marital Enrichment Training

This investigation was the second in a series of empirical studies on marital enrichment training using the Training in Marital Enrichment (TIME) model. The initial study (Mattson, Christensen & England, 1990) found differences on four measures of change, i.e., Marital Self-Evaluation (MSE) (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1984a), Marital Communication Inventory (MCI) (Bienvenu, 1978), Relationship Change Scale (RCS) (Guerney, 1977), and the consensus subscale of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976). These findings reflect an evaluation of the model by the TIME participants as leading to improved marital evaluations, greater perceived change in the quality of the marital relationship, improved levels of communication, and increased consensus reported in the relationship as compared with a control group. While the total dyadic adjustment score improved for the TIME group, it was not shown to be at statistically significant levels. This study sought to provide for further evaluation of the effectiveness of the model in terms of possible differences in marital adjustment.

In addition to further study of the TIME model, interest was also directed in the current study to more fully clarifying the nature of change in the model. by including a measure of the construct of psychological reactance. A more in-depth discussion of the construct will follow, but briefly stated psychological reactance is

conceptualized as the degree of perceived threat to freedom and resultant opposition to change present in situations and environments (Brehm, 1966).

Interest in the reactance construct, in part, follows a literature review by Mace (1986) of the field of marital enrichment training. It concluded that while learning clearly occurs in the training process, the exact type of change brought about and how it relates to other types of change remained unclear and in need of further research. It was anticipated that additional clarity in understanding the change that occurs in marital enrichment training might be provided through an examination of the levels of threat to freedom present following training.

In particular, we were interested in whether change facilitated through the marital enrichment training would be perceived as sufficiently non-threatening so as to lead to stable, or even reduced levels of psychological reactance. This was assumed to be the desired outcome as both current and on-going growth and change in the relationship would in theory be best promoted through an absence of perceived threat to freedom. While the effects of the model as a whole were investigated in the present study, it was further anticipated that the construct of psychological reactance might suggest areas for more detailed investigation of the content and/or process of the training model. The current study was exploratory in that it simply sought intial evidence on the presence of possible effects. No simiar empirical study in this area was found in the literature.

To elaborate further on the construct of psychological reactance, the theory postulates that individuals possess free beliefs and/or behaviors. The free beliefs and/or behaviors will arouse a motivational state of reactance whenever they are eliminated or threatened with elimination (Brehm, 1966). This motivational state in turn leads to belief and/or behavior change designed to restore the lost freedom. Conceptually, reactance arousal is viewed primarily

as determined by the characteristics of a situation, though it seems to reflect some individual differences (Dowd, Milne & Wise, 1991). A related finding has been that signficant, uncontrollable outcome situations are more likely to be viewed as reactant evoking, which results in increased effort and enhanced performance in the attempt to regain control (Brockner & Elkind, 1985). Similarly, low-threat environments have been shown to be reactant weakening (Brockner, & Elkind, 1985). The theory thus implies that the level of reactance present in and generated during the learning process would act to impede further relationship development and the perceived levels of both individual and relationship change.

As a construct, psychological reactance has the additional benefit of providing substantial explanatory power. Jahn and Lichstein (1980) concluded that psychological reactance accounted for a sizeable proportion of all resistive behaviors. In summary, the construct of psychological reactance offers a useful framework for understanding the levels of perceived threat in the learning environment and the consequent degree of oppositional behavior present.

Drawing upon the results of the initial study (Mattson, et al., 1990), it was hypothesized that dyadic consensus would significantly improve but that the total dyadic adjustment score would not improve as a result of the marital enrichment training. It was also hypothesized that psychological reactance would be reported by participants, but not at significantly greater levels following the course of marital enrichment training than at the beginning. The assumption of initial reactance present was arrived at from previous observations of similar samples where many of the participants approached the experience with some trepidation and distrust. It was also frequently noted that at least one of the spouses would often directly or indirectly express some desire not to attend the training program. Further, initial reactance was anticipated given that nearly one-fourth (23.5%)

of the participants had recently been involved in marital counseling, suggesting a certain level of relationship distress and threat of dissolution. These individuals were not excluded, however, as it had been previously shown that distressed clinical couples have made significant gains through enrichment efforts (Brock & Joanning, 1983; Giblin, Sprenkle & Sheehan, 1985).

The expectation that reactance would not be affected by the course of training was inferred from the findings that change was reported by the participants in the initial study (Mattson, et al., 1990), and by the purported nature of the TIME training regimen. That is, the program promotes a low-threat, non-coercive training environment with minimal involvement in the reactance-inducing domains of persuasion and achievement (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1984b; Brockner & Elkind, 1985). Also, participation was voluntary and the training provided was not viewed as representing an uncontrollable outcome situation which might engender reactance.

Method

Subjects

The 17 heterosexual couples who volunteered for participation resided in a Midwestern city with a population of approximately 100,000. The marriage enrichment program was advertised in the Catholic parishes in the area and participation in both the enrichment program and the study was strictly voluntary. A control group was not utilized due to the insufficient number of volunteers as well as their expectation to receive the training. All of the 34 participants did meet the selection criterion of participating in a minimum of 12 hours (70%) of the training program. Specifically, 21 members attended all 7 of the two and one-half hour sessions; 8 individuals attended 6 sessions and 5 attended at least 5 sessions. One couple had previously been involved in marital enrichment training. While this

served as a confounding variable, it was not thought to be of such magnitude as to exclude them from the study.

As a group, the participants were exclusively middle-class in socio-economic background. All couples but one were Roman Catholic in belief. As noted, four of the couples had received marriage counseling prior to referral to the enrichment group and were viewed as remaining in a distressed marital state at the time.

Measures

The first measure used was the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976). This scale uses 32 items to assess dyadic adjustment by measuring the conjugal dyad's perceptions of adjustment as rated on a Likert scale. The DAS, developed through factor analysis, includes four subscales: dyadic consensus, affectional expression, dyadic satisfaction, and dyadic cohesion. The 13 items measuring consensus deal with the level of mutual agreement on matters such as family finances, religious matters, household tasks, and making major decisions. The 10 items measuring satisfaction ask for global ratings of the degree of happiness with the relationship, as well as ratings of the extent of quarreling and regret over mate selection. The 5 items measuring cohesion ask for a rating of the frequency of mutual involvement in outside interests, discussions, and projects. The 4 items measuring affectional expression ask for a rating of mutual agreement on the extent of recent sexual relations and demonstrations of affection.

The DAS is a widely used research instrument. The overall reliability has been reported to be high (.96) and is similarly acceptable for research purposes for all of the subscales, i.e., dyadic consensus (.90), dyadic satisfaction (.94), dyadic cohesion (.86), and affectional expression (.73). The content validity of the items was

established by a panel of authorities in the field, and correlation with the Locke Wallace Marital Adjustment Test was found to be .86 among married respondents, and .88 among divorced respondents (Spanier, 1976).

The Therapeutic Reactance Scale (TRS) (Dowd, Milne, & Wise, 1991) is a 28 item scale also developed through factor analysis. It offers both a total reactance score as well as two partially discrete extracted factors labeled "behavioral reactance" and "verbal reactance", which may be interpreted separately with caution. Internal consistency and test-retest reliabilities (.57 to .60) were found to be at acceptable levels, although not extremely high. Otherwise, convergent, divergent, and construct validity for the scales have been established for research purposes (Dowd, et al., 1991).

Procedure

A within subjects pre-test/post-test design was used with a single group of 34 individuals (17 couples). The group received a 7 week, two and one-half hours per week, TIME training program for a total period of 171/2 hours. The DAS and the TRS were administered immediately prior to and following the training program. The sessions were conducted in a church parish hall and all of the sessions were led by the second author who had extensive prior experience with marital enrichment training and the TIME program, in particular.

The format and content material as described in the leader's guide, Training in Marriage Enrichment (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1984b), and specified in the accompanying couple's text, Time for a Better Marriage (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1984a), was strictly adhered to in both content and process. This included all of the didactic and experiential elements, i.e., the

allowance for skill practice time, the encouragement and reinforcement measures, the use of homework assignments, and the couple and group interactional activities suggested in the manual.

Results

Discussion of the results will focus on the two primary questions posed in the study. First, was there a difference in dyadic consensus, as one measure of dyadic adjustment, from pre-test to post-test as measured by the DAS? While differences were observed in a positive direction for the mean scores for each of the four subscales of the DAS, including consensus, the dependent samples t-test of group means from pre- to post-test revealed that only the satisfaction subscale reached a significant level ($t = 2.54$, $p<.05$). Dyadic consensus, therefore, did not significantly improve as hypothesized.

Subsequent analyses by gender was performed to shed further light on the findings. While both males and females reported improved marital satisfaction following the training, only the female scores reached statistically significant levels when analyzed by gender. No other significant differences by gender were observed.

It was thought that the results were possibly clouded by the four maritally distressed couples previously noted. Therefore, an analysis was also performed with those couples omitted from consideration. This analysis once again found that the total dyadic adjustment scores did not reach significant levels of improvement. Interestingly, the mean of the DAS score did increase more for the four distressed couples (mean increase = 3.62) than it did for the couples not identified as maritally distressed (mean increase = 2.23).

The second major question considered was whether there would be similar or possibly decreasing levels in psychological reactance following marital enrichment training. Surprisingly, the analysis of the data obtained by means of a dependent samples t-test revealed that the total reactance score mean was significantly increased following the marital enrichment training ($t = 2.47$, $df = 33$, $p<.02$). Similarly, a subsequent analysis was performed by gender with the finding that the total reactance score for both males and females increased following training, but only the scores for males reached levels of significance ($t = 2.11$, $df=16$, $p<.05$). However, when the four distressed couples' scores were omitted, the reactance scores were not shown to be increasing at significant levels ($t = 1.94$, $df=12$, $p<.05$).

Further correlational analysis utilizing gain scores on all the variables measured revealed that the gain in the total reactance score, as well as the verbal subscale of the TRS, was inversely related to the gain in the consensus score on the DAS for females ($r = -.63$, $p < .01$). Further, the gain in the verbal subscale of the TRS was found to be inversely related to the gain in the total DAS score for women ($r = -.49$, $p < .05$). As previously noted, interpretation of the subscales of the TRS should be undertaken with caution and tentative conclusions would be the most that could be drawn.

Discussion

Marital satisfaction as measured by a subscale of the DAS was reported as significantly greater following the marital enrichment training with the TIME model. Most of the reported gains in marital satisfaction came from the female participants. This lends further support to the efficacy of the TIME program over a relatively short seven week period. While the total dyadic adjustment score

was found to increase in a positive direction, indicating overall greater total marital adjustment, the gains made were not at significant levels.

The significant improvement in consensus formation evidenced in earlier research (Mattson, et al., 1990) was not supported by the results of this study. However, the nature of consensus change, as well as improvement in total dyadic adjustment, was further explicated by it being shown to vary inversely with psychological reactance in women. This finding suggests that reactance acts in an antagonistic manner in regard to both consensus formation and total marital adjustment for women.

While it is uncertain why this effect would hold only for the women in the sample, the results do suggest that this factor should be taken into account in marital enrichment efforts. One means of doing so would be to offer more opportunities for the participants to exercise more choice and self direction in the training process. Also, as a means of countering reactance, greater use by the leader of more indirect teaching strategies is suggested, e.g., providing less direct instruction and more learner-directed instruction. Perhaps both program content and process might be reexamined in light of developing more alternative methods of participant input into skill and relationship improvement efforts.

While the size of the sample of distressed couples in the present study was too small to draw any substantive, generalizable conclusions, the results do suggest that the higher reactance levels among distressed couples counters the positive effects of marital enrichment training. While it could be argued that the opportunity to air differences and bring problems out in the open may be of more value to the individuals involved, still the likelihood of distressed couples reaching

their goal of marital enrichment through participation in the TIME program is brought into question by the results of this study. Further studies which provide marital enrichment training to larger samples of maritally distressed couples is indicated.

The significantly higher reactance levels found among the males in our sample following marital enrichment training suggests that the perception of threat and/or loss of freedom and control was present during the training program. While this finding was not anticipated from the nature of the learning environment provided, it does appear more understandable on examination of the program content. Specifically, the support and advocacy of the TIME program for relationship equity, and the consequent rebalancing of power in the relationship may be involved. Relationship equity may have been perceived by the more conservative, traditional males in our sample as implying a threat to not only their current beliefs, but also to their established power, control, and role in the marriage.

The increased reactance found may in part be explained in terms of the nature of the sample taken. That is, the distressed participants were almost entirely Catholic in religious faith and likely holding the beliefs that marriage is a sacrament and divorce is to be avoided. It was possible that for a number of the participants the marital enrichment training served as either a last-step measure in avoiding divorce or as an entry point for marital counseling. For these participants, the conclusion of training would lead to a more direct confrontation with the possible threat to their marriage and result in reports of greater reactance.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that psychological reactance is a factor in determining the outcomes of marital enrichment training. The relatively small sample and lack of a control group do represent weaknesses in the study and limit the generalizability of the conclusions drawn. It might be considered that the involvement of one of the researchers in leading the training program also represents a weakness in the design. Therefore, while the results are tentative at best, they do raise a number of questions that deserve furrther study:

1. What are the specific elements of the marital enrichment training program that are perceived as most threatening to the couples involved?

2. Should these elements be discarded or would they be perceived as less threatening if their manner of presentation were modified?

3. What are the specific elements in the methods of the training process that are perceived as most threatening?

4. Are there ways that the program might be adapted to the level of distress in the marital relationship?

5. Is there a certain level of marital distress that results in marital enrichment training being counter productive?

As is the nature of exploratory studies, this study does raise many more questions than it answers. Further research is suggested utilizing a control group and matching marital distress levels to further clarify the nature of the reactance involved and its interaction with marital enrichment training.

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